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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANJUL 000167

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KMCA](#) [KISL](#) [GA](#)  
SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: UPDATE ON HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION

REF: A. BANJUL 124 ET AL  
[1](#)B. BANJUL 100 ET AL (ALL NOTAL)

BANJUL 00000167 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD, REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (C) In recent discussions on the negative human rights trend here, our contacts were downbeat on prospects for early improvement. A reform-minded Muslim cleric, Imam Baba Leigh, portrayed a cowed and co-opted Islamic religious establishment as unwilling to confront President Jammeh over the GOTG's deteriorating human rights record -- exemplified by the March 28 detention of a U.S.-based critic, Fatou Jaw Manneh, on her arrival at Banjul airport. Editor-in-Chief of the private daily, the "Point," Pap Saine, spoke of a "climate of fear" among journalists and said he feared that authorities would close his paper and arrest him were he to publish stories about the controversy over Jammeh's HIV/AIDS and asthma treatment programs. On a more positive note, two opposition politicians, National Assembly deputy Seedia Jatta of the National Alliance for Democracy and Development (NADD) and former deputy Hamat Bah of the National Reconciliation Party (NRP), vowed to continue working through the political system -- despite the reduced "space" -- in order to promote liberalization. The Embassy will continue to seek opportunities to press the GOTG for reversal of the negative human rights trend, but Jammeh's increasingly autocratic behavior serves as a major constraint on our and other Western reps' efforts. END SUMMARY

OVERVIEW

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[1](#)2. (C) Ambassador and Emboffs recently held a series of meetings with Embassy contacts to get their assessments of the human rights situation here and prospects for improvement. Our interlocutors included an Islamic religious leader, Imam Baba Leigh, editor-in-chief of an independent daily, Pap Saine, and two opposition politicians, parliamentarian Seedia Jatta, affiliated with the National Alliance for Democracy and Development (NADD), and the head of the National Reconciliation Party (NRP), Hamat Bah. Our sources were generally downbeat, dismissing prospects for an imminent reversal of the negative human rights trend evident in The Gambia over the past year and a half. They portrayed the country's erratic, volatile President, Yahya Jammeh, as increasingly autocratic and -- despite the passage of time since the abortive coup plot in March 2006 -- still deeply preoccupied with the security of his government. They expressed worry that, given Jammeh's authoritarian instincts,

The Gambia's currently restrictive human rights and political arenas would likely persist for some time.

#### ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS FIGURE'S CONCERN

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13. (C) Imam Baba Leigh, known for his liberal, reformist outlook, registered special concern over Gambian authorities' disregard for the rule of law, citing the upsurge in such abuses as arbitrary arrest and prolonged detention without charge since the failed coup plot. (COMMENT: In the most recent example of such abuses, we note the March 28 detention of a prominent U.S.-based Gambian journalist and anti-government critic, Fatou Jaw Manneh, on her arrival in the country for a family visit. The NGO, Reporters without Borders, has issued a statement condemning authorities' action and calling for her release. The GOTG has issued no statement on her detention; according to our sources, she remains in custody and is being questioned by officials of the National Intelligence Agency (NIA). END COMMENT) He lamented that the police and security forces seemed increasingly free to act with impunity, asserting that, by and large, neither the Justice Ministry nor the judiciary displayed the autonomy and assertiveness to bring officials to account for excesses.

14. (C) In response to our question, Baba Leigh ruled out the possibility of The Gambia's Islamic religious leaders approaching Jammeh to press for an end to abuses. He explained that these leaders -- e.g., members of the Supreme Islamic Council -- had been cowed or co-opted by Jammeh, and hence were unwilling to confront the President. Baba Leigh added that he personally had repeatedly sought an appointment with Jammeh, but had been rebuffed. Baba Leigh acknowledged U.S. pressure on Jammeh to improve the human rights situation, describing as "appropriate and justified" the Millenium Challenge Corporation's June 2006 suspension of The

BANJUL 00000167 002.2 OF 002

Gambia's eligibility for the Millenium Challenge Account program due, inter alia, to slippage in eligibility criteria in the "ruling justly" category.

#### RESTRICTIVE MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

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15. (C) Editor-in-chief Pap Saine stated that there was no sign of an easing in The Gambia's restrictive media environment and spoke of a "climate of fear" among private journalists. He said the GOTG's suspected involvement in the still-unsolved December 2004 assassination of his partner at the "Point," Deyda Hydara, remained very much on journalists' minds. Adding to journalists' worry, he continued, was the GOTG's further media crackdown following the failed coup plot. (NOTE: Saine was referring to authorities' closure of a private journal, the "Independent," and prolonged detention of several members of its staff. END NOTE) Saine observed that the crackdown was continuing, citing the "disappearance" and presumed detention since July 2006 of journalist Ebrima Manneh, formerly with a pro-government journal, the "Daily Observer." Indicative of the restrictive environment, Saine said self-censorship by private media institutions had become common and cited the controversy over Jammeh's HIV/AIDS and asthma treatment programs as a case in point (ref a). He said that he dared not publish stories about skepticism over the effectiveness of the treatment and about reported patient deaths, as to do so would likely prompt authorities to shut down his paper and arrest him.

16. (C) Saine said that while he did not expect authorities to permit the "Independent" to resume publication, he still held out some hope that they would permit a radio station shut down in October 2005, Senegalese-owned SUD FM, to resume broadcasting. According to Saine, Senegal-based SUD FM reps had recently travelled here to seek restoration of their broadcasting license, but their visit had proved fruitless,

as they had been unable to meet with concerned GOTG officials. Despite this setback, Saine expected SUD FM's management to continue efforts to return to the airwaves.

#### OPPOSITION POLITICIANS' DETERMINATION

17. (C) Opposition politicians Seedia Jatta and Hamat Bah echoed our other interlocutors in bemoaning the deterioration in the overall human rights situation and the less tolerant political arena. At the same time, both stressed their determination to continue to work within the system and promote liberalization. Jatta, the sole incumbent opposition deputy among three in the National Assembly to win re-election in the January balloting, vowed to work closely with the four newly elected deputies affiliated with the rival opposition United Democratic Party (UDP). (NOTE: The opposition parties hold five out of 53 seats in the National Assembly. END NOTE) As for Bah, a former parliamentarian narrowly defeated in the January contest by the ruling APRC party's candidate, he asserted that he would be a presidential candidate in the next presidential election, scheduled for 2011. He said that, in preparation for his presidential bid, he planned to launch soon a nationwide campaign to develop his party's membership and structures. While recognizing Jammeh's and his APRC party's dominance of what little remained of "political space" in The Gambia, Bah insisted that there was still sufficient room for him in that "space" to make his party-building and presidential initiatives feasible.

#### COMMENT

18. (C) The GOTG itself has shown little willingness in recent months to engage with us in substantive fashion on human rights issues, declining our proposal to consult on steps it could take to address human rights-related and other concerns and thereby begin the process of seeking restoration of MCA eligibility (ref b). The GOTG has maintained silence over our recently-published Country Report on Human Rights Practices, which amply documents the deterioration in the GOTG's human rights record in 2006. We will continue to look for ways to press for reversal of the negative human rights trend here, but President Jammeh's increasingly autocratic behavior serves as a major constraint on our efforts and those of other Western representatives, e.g, the UK and European Union. END COMMENT

STAFFORD